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How They Stack Up – The AFC West In July

By Jay Nault

Many pundits see a clear-cut favorite in the AFC West, and perhaps they're right – the Denver

Broncos, at least on paper, appear to have a significant edge over their brethren in the division. However, each of the other three teams made changes that could lead to one or more surprise challengers for the division title. Each team's offseason movements are detailed below.

Denver Broncos

Offseason Additions: The Broncos are right on the cusp of the Super Bowl, as they came within one bad Jake Plummer game of getting there last season. Therefore, the usually-active Broncos were somewhat quiet this offseason. Through free agency and the draft, the Broncos continued to add to their DL by way of the Cleveland Browns' roster, adding DE Kenard Lang. They also signed OL Kyle Kosier, LB Nate Webster and brought back DB Willie Middlebrooks, who was once a first-round pick by the Broncos. The team also traded for WR Javon Walker, which is a classic boom-or-bust transaction. In the draft, the Broncos caused quite a stir by drafting QB Jay Cutler in the first round, perhaps to push Plummer towards more consistency.

Outlook: The Broncos will be a good team, as they've always been competitive under Mike Shanahan. If their offense can become more of a vertical threat with Walker, they will be in the thick of things in the AFC.

Kansas City Chiefs

Offseason Additions: The Chiefs were quiet in terms of adding players in the offseason, but they did bring in a new coach in Herm Edwards, and their seemingly-yearly mission remains: find a defense that can help their powerful offense. The Chiefs only signed two free agents, neither of whom is a "big splash": RB Quentin Griffin and DB Chris Johnson. In the draft, the Chiefs added DE Tamba Hali in the first round and S Bernard Pollard in the second.

Outlook: It always seems to be the same story for the Chiefs. If their defense can play well enough to even rank in the middle of the NFL, they'll be a dangerous team with their high-scoring offense.

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Edwards has built good defenses in the past, and his ability to do so in Kansas City will determine the success or failure of their season.

Oakland Raiders

Offseason Additions: The Raiders are another team that looks great on paper, but it'll be up to their new/old coach to instill discipline and chemistry, which were seriously lacking in recent years. Art Shell is definitely a respected figure, and another important task for him will be to rebuild their defense. The Raiders were active on that side of the ball, adding DB's Tyrone Poole and Duane Starks. The Raiders also added a pass rusher to go with Derrick Burgess in DE Lance Johnstone. The only significant offensive addition was QB Aaron Brooks, who is talented but erratic. The Raiders also addressed their defense in the draft, picking DB Michael Huff and LB Thomas Howard in the first two rounds.

Outlook: The Raiders have the talent, but the questions involve their ability to find that discipline and

also finding a scheme that will fit their personnel. If Shell can do that, this could be a team to watch in 2006.

San Diego Chargers

Offseason Additions: The Chargers were very quiet in general in the offseason, as the vast majority of their starters from a very good but disappointing 2005 team return. Their only free agent additions were S Marlon McCree and TE Aaron Shea. The Chargers also drafted talented but enigmatic DB Antonio Cromartie in the first round of the draft. They did make one change, though, and it's enormous in nature – QB Philip Rivers takes over for the departed Drew Brees, and this decision created some internal strife within the organization at the management level.

Outlook: The Chargers' season depends on Philip Rivers, and it's as simple as that. They need to improve their pass defense as well, but they have a potential superstar on that side of the ball with Shawne Merriman. If Rivers succeeds, this team will be dangerous. If he struggles, so will the Chargers.

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Which Division Will Provide The Best Football Tickets In 2006?

By Jay Nault

Even though we are entrenched in the NFL's "Age of Parity," fans around the league still want to know what they're getting when they buy their football tickets. As we look at the divisional breakdown, it becomes apparent that certain divisions are deeper than others. That's why we're going to break them down individually by way of "Divisional Power Rankings." These rankings could change throughout the season, but now is a good time to take our first look.

1. NFC East

The NFC East, top-to-bottom, is the toughest division in football right now. Any one of the four teams could realistically qualify for the playoffs, and the final standings could shake out in just about any way and no one would be really surprised.

2. NFC South

The NFC South contains a Super Bowl contender in the Panthers, two solid playoff-level teams in the Buccaneers and Falcons, and perhaps the most improved team in the league, the Saints. This division will be brutal, and the winner will definitely be battle-tested.

3. AFC West

The AFC West is almost as difficult, as the Broncos have Super Bowl aspirations, the Chiefs are expected to at least make the playoffs, the Chargers are talented and the Raiders could be scary if they ever put all their talent together. The rivalries in this division also make every game a battle.

4. AFC North

The AFC North contains the defending champions, and they didn't even win the division last year. The Bengals did, but they have question marks surrounding QB Carson Palmer and off-field distractions. Baltimore is much-improved and the Browns are getting better.

5. AFC East

The East has the rivalries, but only two good teams in the Patriots and Dolphins. The Jets and Bills, whether they admit it or not, are rebuilding. Regardless, fans of every team are extremely loyal, so football tickets sales will be high for any of these divisional battles.

6. AFC South

The South contains one potential juggernaut in the Colts, one fringe playoff team in Jacksonville, and two teams in the Texans and Titans that are in full rebuild mode. The Colts-Jaguars games will be entertaining, but the Texans and Titans are definitely a notch below as of now.

7. NFC North

The NFC North has one established playoff team in the Bears, one likely playoff team in the Vikings, one team that could be a surprise in the Packers and the Lions, who seem to constantly be rebuilding. The best thing going for this division is the level of intensity present every time any of these two teams meet.

8. NFC West

Yes, the Seahawks got all the way to the Super Bowl last season, but after that there isn't much. The Rams could make a push this year, but they're still a year or two away. The Cardinals could surprise as well, but they've been perennial disappointments, and the 49ers need time to restock their roster with talent, so they're not going anywhere anytime soon. There are intense rivalries in the division, however, and football tickets are always hard to find for a Seahawks – Rams game.

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